Love Letter
Mercury.N

Cover: *When the World Falls Silent* @Mercury.N

Born in China, trained at Edinburgh College of Art, and now based in Scotland, Mercury.N, brings an internationally shaped perspective to her practice. Following graduation, she spent several months working in China as a film director before returning to Edinburgh, where she now balances a career as an art teacher with her continued personal work.

Photography sits at the heart of her practice — which includes film, installation, performance, and truly remarkable writing. Rather than treating the camera as a documentary tool, she engages it as a means for narrative construction, drawing on her wide variety of experience to stage carefully imagined scenes that invite close looking and deeper interpretation. Techniques such as double exposure, layering, and engraving allow her to push photography beyond the captured moment and into something more expansive and allusive.

Much of her work is rooted in personal history. Growing up queer within a relatively conservative cultural environment, she navigated a world in which queer existence was met largely with silence — absent from legal recognition, educational discourse, and open conversation. This quiet erasure, and the ambiguity it produces, became the conceptual foundation of her artistic inquiry. *Love Letter* represents one chapter in this continuing body of work.

Her work returns repeatedly to the presence that exists between sound and silence, touch and distance, visibility and disappearance — a real yet insubstantial "something" — nameless but clearly accessible to and beautifully described by the artist's imagination. Go with Mercury as she draws these hidden realities into view — offering them, gently but deliberately, the chance to be seen and recognized.

橘黄色的灯光下，我从你眼里看见我的影，声音藏在歌词的间隙里，絮絮

Translation: In the orange glow, I see my reflection in your eyes; your voice weaves through the music, murmuring.

The creation of the *Love Letter* series began in 2024 with a small and slightly absurd incident in my own family.

Entwined

My partner and I, both female, have a habit of writing letters to each other. These letters are mostly playful and romantic in nature. Because they are sent through the regular mail, they occasionally arrive together with letters from other family members. Sometimes my family receives them before I do. After reading parts of these letters, my family continued to insist that I was a single person with no romantic experience. They explained the affectionate language away by saying that letters between people of the same gender must simply be jokes between friends. At first, I treated this as a slightly awkward but harmless misunderstanding.

However, one day something happened that made me see the situation differently.

In a month as ordinary as any, the letter that was supposed to be sent to me never arrived. At first, I assumed it had simply been lost in the mail. Thankfully, with electronic communication so advanced these days, the loss of a single letter isn't a big deal, so I quickly forgot about it. Then something interesting came out. Months later, by accident, I discovered the unopened envelope hidden inside a small cabinet in my home. It had been deliberately covered by other papers and objects, quietly placed out of sight for six months. It's not about prying, just letting it fade away quietly.

No one mentioned it. No one explained it.

Unlike the dramatic coming out scenes often portrayed in films, which are filled with confrontation, arguments, or emotional conversations. This situation was strangely quiet. The existence of the relationship was treated almost like dust on a dark carpet: when the carpet is shaken, the dust briefly rises into the air, only to settle back down again. Everyone knows it is there, but it is easier not to talk about it, hoping it will eventually disappear on its own.

Of course, "unfortunately," neither dust nor sexual orientation disappears like that.

What interested me most about this experience was not hostility, but avoidance. Through interviews and information gathering, I found that in many cases, this reaction does not come from deep hatred or fear. Instead, it often comes from uncertainty, a lack of knowledge, or simply a lack of curiosity. When a subject is rarely discussed openly, people learn to move around it rather than toward it. In the absence of open discussion or education, people sometimes fill those gaps with assumptions. For example, one of my interviewees mentioned that in middle school sex education courses, the curriculum contains no information about homosexuality. However, in the section on HIV/AIDS education, it is noted that the transmission rate is significantly higher among men who have sex with men than among heterosexuals. This lack of understanding about homosexuality leads some people to associate queer identity directly with disease. These misunderstandings grow quietly when no one feels comfortable addressing them directly.

This experience became the starting point for *Love Letter*.

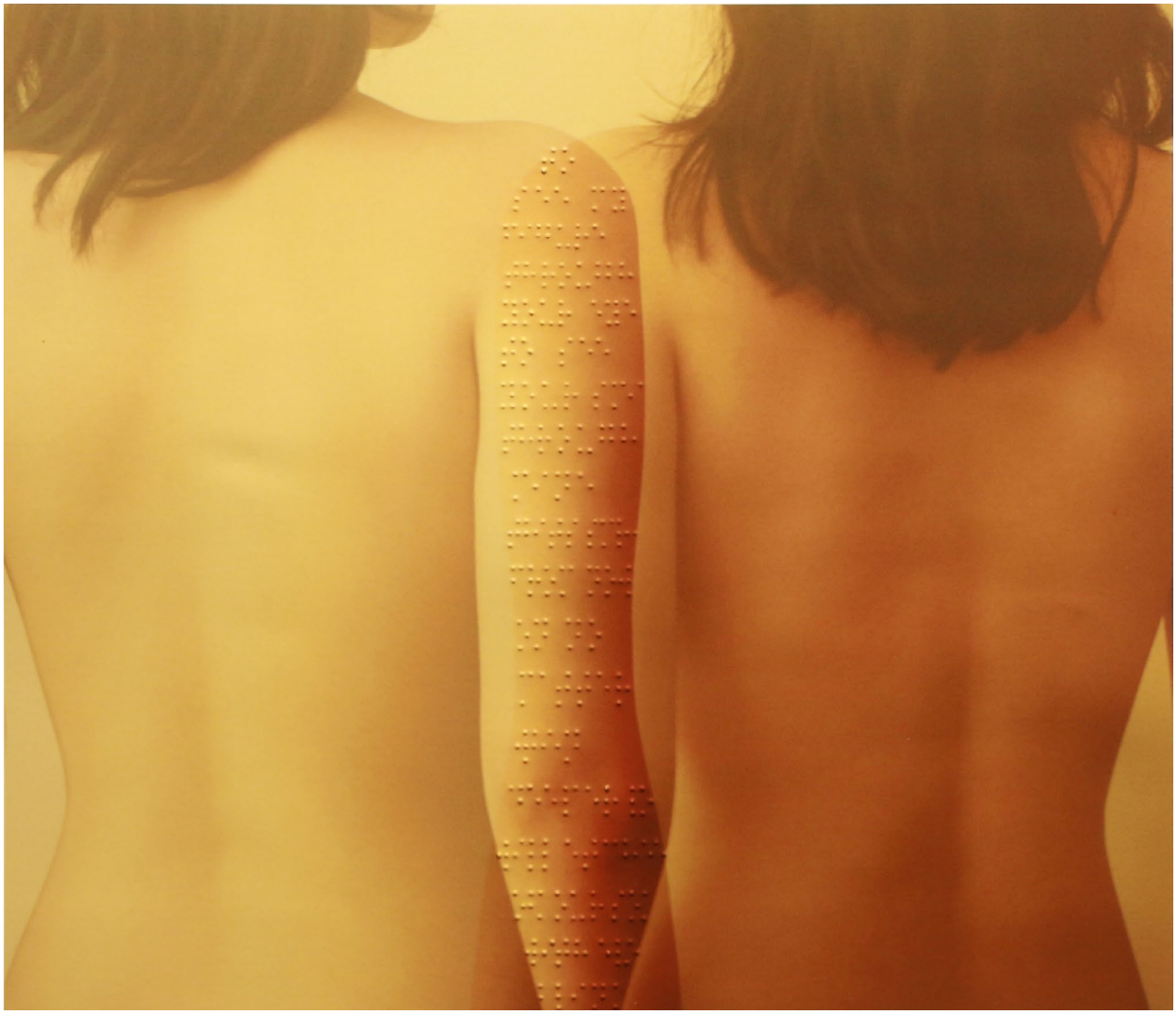
In this series, I use photography to hold still something that is often allowed to remain vague or unspoken: the simple presence of queer affection. Photography has the ability to freeze a moment and make it linger. By fixing gestures such as holding hands, kissing, or walking together, the image prevents these moments from quietly fading away.

Dance with Me

At the same time, I wanted the visual language of the work to reflect the same state of partial visibility that queer relationships often occupy in the communities I grew up in. To create this feeling, I used digital layering to simulate the effect of double exposure. Two figures that appear to exist in different moments or spaces overlap within the same frame. In these individual photographs, they appear to have no connection with one another, just as they do in real life when they try to hide their queer identities. But through the overlapping, they transcend time and space to hold hands, kiss, or walk together. These interactions are intimate, but they are also slightly unstable, as if they exist somewhere between presence and disappearance.

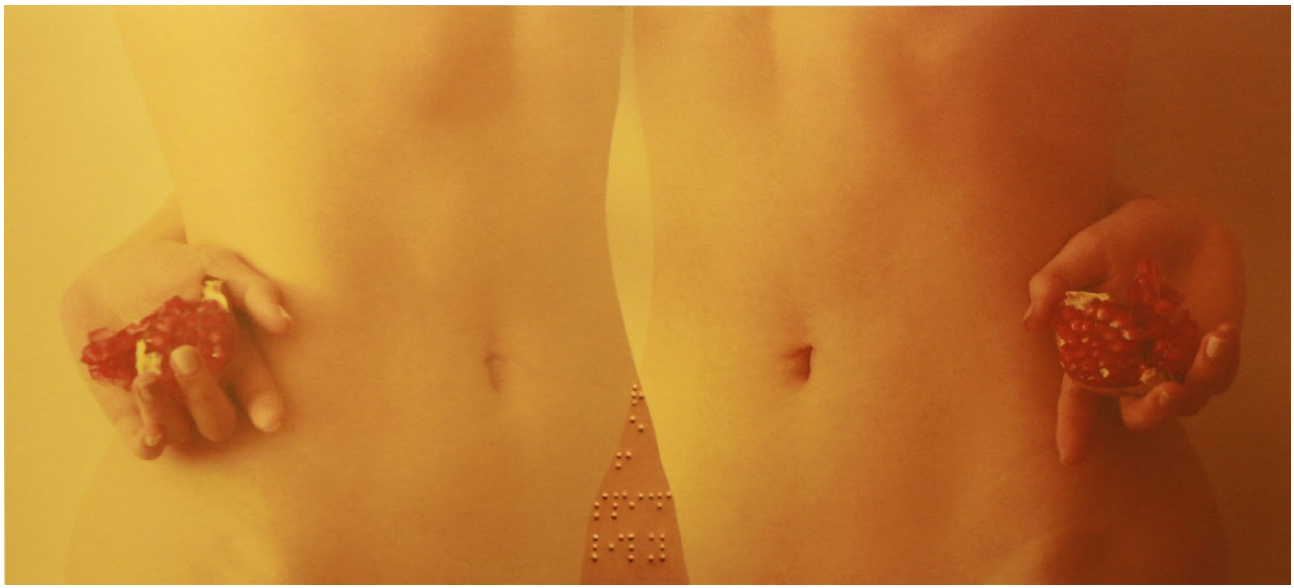
Another element of the work involves braille. Braille is a system designed to make language accessible through touch. I was drawn to it as a metaphor for how queer relationships are often perceived: present, but unreadable by those who are unwilling to engage with them directly. In the images, a love letter is engraved in braille at the point where the two figures overlap.

My Pillow



At first glance, these raised dots resemble small irregularities on the skin, almost like symptoms of an illness. The viewer might feel a moment of discomfort or uncertainty. This feeling is exactly the same as the emotions people experience when they encounter the queer community and develop misunderstandings and cognitive biases. But when the braille is read or translated, it reveals a simple, ordinary love letter.

Through this shift, the work invites viewers to move from unfamiliarity to recognition, from suspicion or discomfort toward understanding.



With *Love Letter*, I hope to create a space where people can pause and look directly at something that is often left unspoken. Because only when something is seen and understood can people truly decide how to respond to it.

As I create more works like this and encourage more artists to join the conversation about these things hidden within blurred boundaries, I hope that what was once hidden in the cabinet, unopened and avoided, can become visible and recognizable.

Some western artists look east for inspiration. What do you think they are looking for?

While I can't really speak about others' views, I can speak about my own Chinese heritage in my work. What has influenced me most is not simply a visual style, but a sense of patience within the creative process and an uncompromising pursuit of perfection in art itself. More than any specific object or technique, I think this artistic attitude, this relentless pursuit of refinement and perfection, has had the deepest influence on me.

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I've spent a great deal of time studying traditional Chinese artistic practices, including ink painting, mineral pigment painting, and traditional tea ceremony. All value patience in pursuit of perfection.

Take mineral pigment painting as an example. Its colors are not created through direct mixing, but through the layering of multiple pigments. Beneath what appears to be a simple blended surface, there may actually be several hidden layers of color. After each application, the artist must wait for the

surface to dry naturally, sometimes for days, before continuing. In the final stage, the painting is polished to gradually reveal the colors concealed underneath.

What part of your photography owes its aesthetic understanding to your Chinese heritage?

The concept of negative space, or *liubai* in Chinese. In Chinese culture, *liubai* is an essential aesthetic philosophy: it allows emptiness itself to create space for the viewer's imagination. I often explain it through the difference between text and image. When someone reads a piece of writing, they naturally imagine the scene being described, and that imagined image changes depending on each person's experiences and emotions. The beauty created in that process is indefinite, boundless, and deeply personal. But once those words are directly visualized and fully rendered, the freedom of imagination disappears. Sometimes the audience even feels disappointed, because the open space created by absence has been taken away.

That, to me, is the power of *liubai*. The emotional and psychological reaction that happens inside that empty space can sometimes be more meaningful than the artwork itself.

Do you see an impact on your work from other cultures and traditions?

I draw inspiration from everywhere. What unfamiliar cultures first give me is a sense of freshness. I think people are naturally attracted to things they don't fully understand, like a song in a language you cannot speak, or a vague and tender piece of poetry. Mystery often feels more seductive than something overly familiar or easily explained.

However, because my understanding of other cultures was sometimes limited, I've also made mistakes. When I was working

as a director, I once designed a title for a fictional assassin organization called “Night Hawk.” I translated the name into another language, using an online translator without doing proper research, and accidentally gave this cold-blooded killer group a title that meant “The Greatest Suckers in History.” Everyone in my team burst out laughing.

That experience taught me something important, that learning and understanding are necessary to genuinely appreciate the depth and beauty that exist beneath the surface of another culture.

These images are subtle, monochromatic, minimal. How did you decide on soft gold light for this series?

The soft gold tones in this series actually come from a very personal habit in my daily life. I’m someone with a very active imagination, and because of that, I often have vivid nightmares. To comfort myself when I wake up in the middle of the night, I usually leave a warm golden light on until morning. That kind of light makes me feel safe and calm.

Warm colors naturally create a sense of comfort for people. In the same way that yellow or orange food often feels more appetizing than blue or purple food, warm light immediately pulls people into a space that feels intimate, private, and comforting. I wanted the audience to enter the photographs through that feeling first. But because I’ve woken up under that same light so many times, it gradually began to carry a contradictory emotional meaning for me. Alongside comfort, it also became connected to anxiety, sleeplessness, and the exhausting repetition of fear. The warmth started to feel almost overwhelming, even suffocating.

During the shoot, I added a weaker warm light into the shadows, allowing the darker areas of the image to shift subtly

toward red. I wanted the shadows to feel restless, almost as if they were quietly boiling underneath the surface. At first glance, the images appear soft and comforting, but after spending more time with them, a sense of irritation and emotional tension slowly begins to emerge.

Tell more about braille and its symbolic use in the project.

I actually discovered braille during the making of this project. Before that, I had only been experimenting with visual layering and overlapping forms. It was only one day, when I happened to touch braille on an elevator button, that I first really noticed it. Although it's used everywhere, I had completely ignored its presence for most of my life, even assuming it was something rare or marginal. Yet its state of being, simultaneously visible and invisible, felt closely aligned with the conceptual direction of my work. Once it entered the project, it naturally became a core element.

What is the source of the braille texts in the images?

The language used in my work is not an existing real-world script. I am attempting to construct a new language for more

abstract artistic expression, one that emphasizes a sense of unfamiliarity in what is readable within the work. This series is my first attempt at developing such a system. I plan to continue developing this language in future works, further exploring its readability and expressive possibilities.

Similarly, this work is subtly political. While it is addressed to a partner, does *Love Letter* also send a different message to the world?

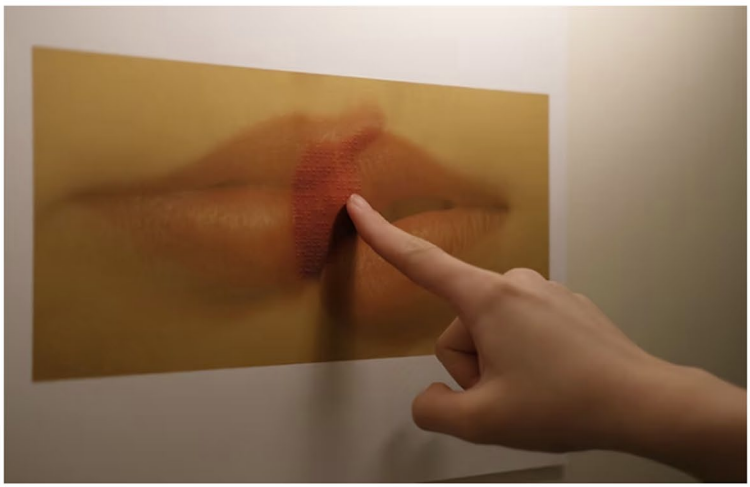
I didn't really define or limit the audience. From the beginning of my creation, my expression is very subjective and self-directed. It is something I need to say out loud in my own terms. I don't really concern myself with what people choose to do with it after that, it is beyond my control. In a way, this process itself is part of what I consider art. A work is never a fixed message. It functions more like a mirror. It reflects different times, different societies, and ultimately allows viewers to see themselves within it.

I often think of it like a seed. To me, it might be a rose, but to someone else it could be a poppy. What I want to do is simply scatter it and let it grow in a wild, uncontrolled way. Different cultures, different social contexts, and even different individuals will inevitably shape it into entirely different forms. Maybe one day the audience sees it as provocative nudity. The next day, they might see it as high art. It may even become something completely opposite to my own intention or definition of it. But I find that very interesting. In fact, I look forward to it, whatever it becomes.

When and how did queerness become something you made art with, in addition to something you were?

At first, I wasn't even aware of myself as what people call "queer." I didn't see attraction to different genders as something

unusual or requiring a label. It was only when people began to ask me questions about my partner's gender that I started to realize, "Oh, does that make me part of a minority group?" And then I found myself wondering, who actually defines these categories in the first place? I remember once a friend asked me why I was attracted to women, and whether it felt different. My answer was that I am attracted to the person, not their gender. What I love is not a gender or a specific trait like that. To me, that way of framing it already feels somewhat artificial.



In that moment, I also realized something else. I had been quite presumptuous in assuming that other people would naturally understand and respect the way I see things. In reality, no one can fully step outside their own lived experience to immediately understand something unfamiliar. That realization became a starting point for me. I began to articulate my experiences and thoughts more consciously, and to share them through my work so that others could see them. That process becomes a dialogue, and it is through that exchange that I am able to deepen my understanding and continue creating.

Talk about your creativity. Where do ideas come from? Preplanning? Playful experimentation? Both?

I usually begin with a concept, and then move into visual experimentation. Because of my academic background and my experience working as a director, my creative process was initially very purpose-driven. I tend to approach visual elements almost the way a director casts actors. Every light, object, gesture, and composition is carefully selected to serve a specific role within the story I want to tell. My goal is always to find the most precise and effective visual language for expressing an idea. At the same time, photography itself has a kind of unpredictable vitality that I deeply love. No matter how carefully something is planned, the process always leaves room for accidents and discoveries. Sometimes it is a particular beam of light, a moment of lost focus, or a movement that happens unexpectedly in front of the camera. These accidents often surpass my original intentions and lead me somewhere better than I had imagined.

Love Letter is actually a good example of that. In its early stages, the series looked completely different from what it eventually became. At first, the images almost felt like two people hiding from each other inside the frame. Then, by accident, I captured a sequence of a butterfly beating its wings. When I placed the two images together, I immediately thought, "This is it. This is the feeling I was searching for." I really treasure those moments of surprise. They make the work feel alive to me.

What helps the flow? Stimulants? Sedatives? Music? Silence?

As some of my metaphors show, I genuinely love food and drink, and I'm always excited to try new things. Honestly, a large part of why I chose to come to Scotland was because of

whisky. But strangely enough, enjoyment itself is usually not very helpful to my creative process. The thing that helps me think most clearly is actually something very simple — taking a shower. When I'm in that state, physically relaxed, completely alone, surrounded only by the repetitive sound of water, my mind becomes extremely active. Usually, I spend a great deal of time researching beforehand, collecting references, emotions, and fragments of ideas until they accumulate in my mind. Then I take a shower, and it feels almost like oil being poured onto the rusted gears of a clock, suddenly allowing everything to move again. Somehow, all those scattered ideas begin reorganizing themselves into the shape I need. Many of my best ideas arrive during those moments.

What makes an artwork "work?" When is an artwork finished?

When I first started creating work, I didn't care at all whether a work would "succeed" in the eyes of others. I created work because the process itself was intensely satisfying to me. At times, creating feels almost self-destructive. The exhaustion, obsession, and emotional pressure somehow create a kind of dopamine rush that keeps pulling me back into it. I also have an almost unhealthy standard for perfection when it comes to my own work. Before I can consider a piece finished, it has to satisfy me first. It has to move me first. Only then do I feel it is ready to be placed in front of other people.

And when the work is finally shown publicly, I would love to say that I don't care about recognition, but that would be a lie. Of course people feel excited, proud, or even a little consumed by it when they receive admiration, support, or financial success. I'm no exception to that. But the truth is, I still don't know how to deliberately create something that will definitely move other people. I don't think I'm particularly good at predicting how others will feel. So the only principle I really

follow is honesty. The work has to be honest with myself, and it has to genuinely affect me first.

What role does social media play in your practice? How do you use the Internet? Useful? Necessary but annoying? Worthless?

Social media is useful, necessary, and annoying at the same time. My work as a director was closely connected to the Internet and social platforms, but they also make me feel cautious. I don't believe that personal expression can remain universally "correct" or satisfy every audience across different moments, cultures, and social contexts. Yet social media flattens all of those audiences together into the same space. Different people, with completely different values, sensitivities, and contexts, are all responding at once. Fear of being attacked or misunderstood can make posting intimidating. There is something psychologically exhausting about being constantly accessible to strangers.

At the same time, I also understand that without social media, work travels far more slowly now. It becomes quieter, less visible, less able to reach people. So in some sense, participation feels unavoidable. I publish my work and try my best to perform the role of a "proper artist" within that system, but I cannot honestly say that it feels free to me. Sometimes it feels more like negotiating with an invisible crowd.

You are among only a few who admit to finding any place for AI in your practice. How does it work for you?

At this point, AI functions more like an experienced technical assistant than a creator. Its knowledge base allows me to quickly access information that would previously have taken a long time to research. It is also extremely efficient at handling repetitive tasks, which has made it much easier for me to start

projects that would otherwise have felt too time-consuming or difficult. For example, I've used it for animation frame interpolation, or for generating rough image layouts based on my instructions. Tasks that might have taken months, or would have required hiring additional help, can sometimes be completed in a much shorter time.

However, the more I use it, the more aware I become of its limitations. Its thinking is fundamentally derived from what already exists. It cannot truly step outside of existing knowledge to generate something radically new. When I use it in creative work, I often see outputs that contain traces of many different artists, but I rarely see a sense of authorship or "self" within them. What it produces feels like a highly competent answer sheet, but the "correct answer" is itself questionable. In that sense, both humans and AI still have a long way to evolve.

Any tips for others thinking of heading down the AI road?

I don't see myself as someone who can offer guidance for everyone — that would be arrogant. But I do think it's worth asking why people are afraid of AI. Are they afraid of the problems it might create, or are they afraid of their own perceived limitations? Or perhaps they are afraid of a system in which already limited human agency becomes even more constrained? If you are afraid of it, then perhaps the only honest response is to sit with that fear. And if you love it, then allow yourself to experience that love as well.

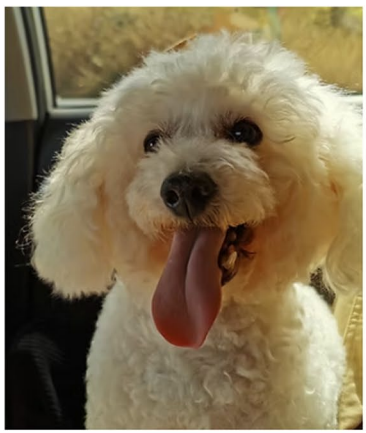
Who among your teachers, mentors, and conspirators gets a hat tip for providing meaningful lessons, support, inspiration?

I've been incredibly fortunate throughout my creative journey. In this space, it would be impossible to list everyone

who has helped me along the way. My family, friends, teachers, and colleagues have all given me an enormous amount of support.

When I decided to seriously pursue photography, my parents purchased professional equipment for me. My uncle, Zeng, arranged for a professional photography mentor to guide me. Zeng also gave me a full Godox lighting setup, which was actually the same equipment I used to light *Love Letter*. I'm deeply grateful for their help.

I especially want to mention the model in this series. We have been close friends for many years and have collaborated on more than ten projects together. We naturally understand each other when it comes to aesthetics and artistic expression, and every time we create something together, she supports the work wholeheartedly. We have stayed awake all night waiting for sunrise just to capture a specific color in the morning light. We have also spent countless days and nights sewing fabrics and building images together simply to realize the exact image we had in mind.



And of course, I should also mention my dog, Baiyu. During countless late nights of working and creating, he would curl up on my lap and stay beside me the entire time, although he usually contributed by snoring very loudly.

In the end, I honestly don't think I could have accomplished any of this alone. Whatever my work has become is inseparable from the support, trust, and companionship of the people around me.

What's next? A new project planned? Travel? A book? Is there anything we can help you to promote?

I am working on a new project that attempts to construct a space existing somewhere between life and death — a kind of threshold world. It may become a photographic series, or perhaps a moving image work, animation, or even a narrative-driven interactive piece. The final direction will depend largely on the resources and budget available to me. In the coming months, I will be sharing a more concrete proposal for this work, and I may also consider crowdfunding as part of its development.

In parallel, the *Love Letter* series will be touring across multiple countries in the near future. If you are interested in my work, you can follow me on Instagram. If the exhibition happens to come to your city, I would be glad if you could visit. You are also welcome to leave comments, save the work, or support my upcoming projects in any form.

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